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Vivekananda is the only friend whom I follow
no one beyond the 4 years

Every thing else ends with death

Vivekananda

Vivekananda

The Five Faceted Shiva

Dr. P. Achuthan

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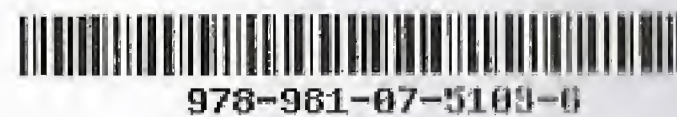
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Swami Vivekananda addressing the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893

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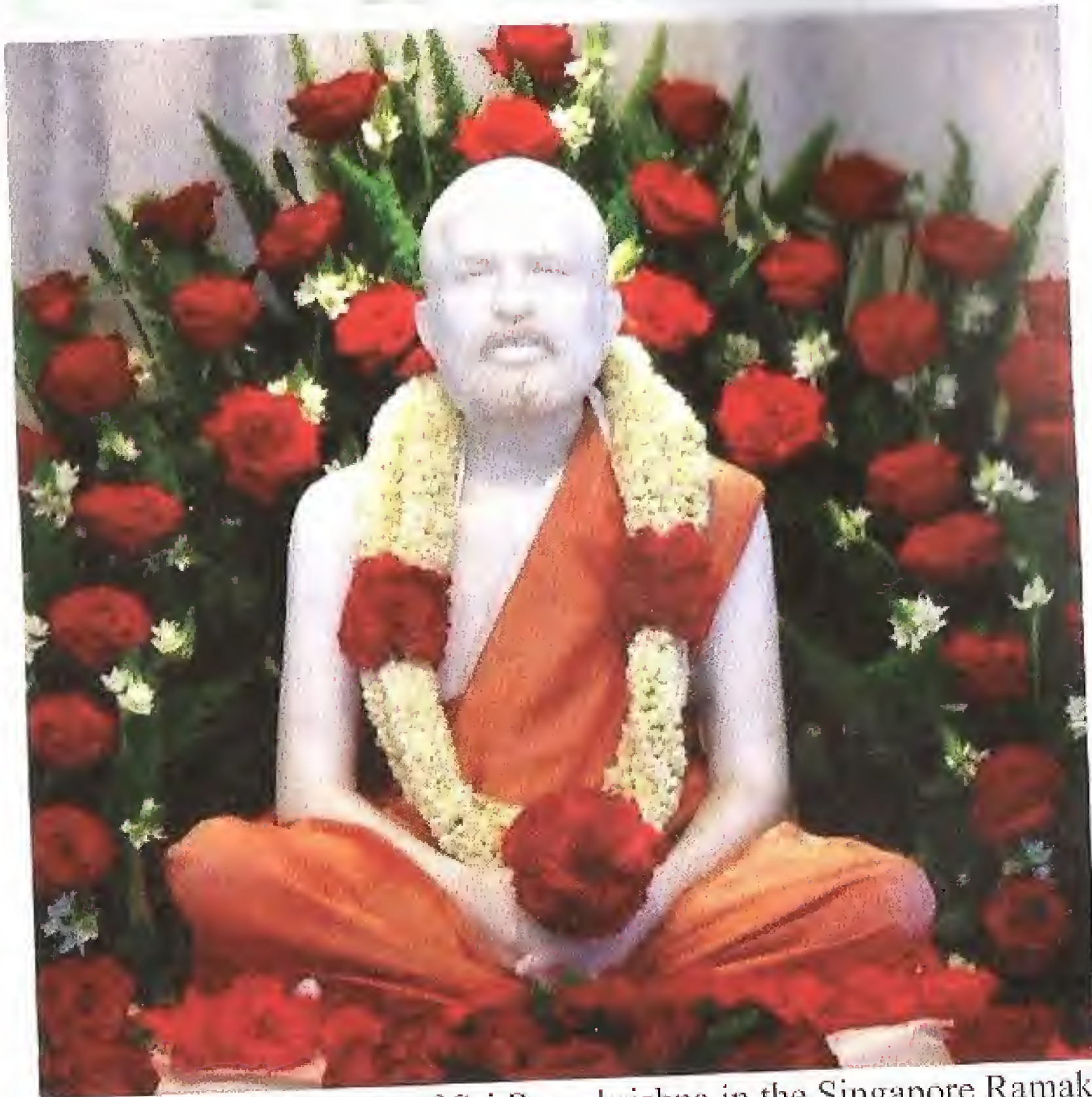
“Vivekananda - The Five Faceted Shiva” is the compilation of articles which were originally published periodically in Nirvana, the quarterly journal of Ramakrishna Mission, Singapore. We are grateful to the local authorities of the Mission for permitting us to publish these articles in this format. We express our sincere gratitude to Rev Swami Muktirupananda, President, Ramakrishna Mission Singapore, for graciously writing the foreword for this publication.

Dr. P. Achuthan, the author is an initiated disciple of Swami Nirmalananda, and a retired Professor of English. He emphasizes through these articles that Swami Vivekananda was a prophet with five distinct characteristics identical with the Hindu concept of Pancha-Mukha Shiva - five faced Shiva.

We express our sincere gratitude to Mr. K.S.C. Pillai for writing a short biography of Swami Vivekananda for those readers, who are not yet familiar with Swamiji's life.

This is our humble offering to Sri Swamiji in commemoration of his 150th birth anniversary celebration.

Prakash Kamanat
TULASI BOOKS, Singapore
12 January 2013



The decorated marble image of Sri Ramakrishna in the Singapore Ramakrishna Mission Temple



Images of Swami Vivekandanda and Holy Mother Sarada Devi in the Singapore Ramakrishna Mission Temple

Foreward

It is a matter of joy to learn that Dr. Achutan's seven in-depth articles on Swami Vivekananda are being published in a book-form for a wider public. These articles had appeared serially in 'Nirvana', the quarterly journal of the Ramakrishna Mission, Singapore. These scholarly, well-written essays shed light on some aspects of Swamiji telling the readers his momentous advent on this earth, and his universal message to mankind. Vivekananda took the message of his Master Sri Ramakrishna to America and the Western hemisphere. It was the need of the hour. The people, disenchanted with sense pleasures and unbridled hedonism had been simmering with tremendous discontentment. They were waiting for a great soul to free them from this trap.

At the right moment, as ordained by the divine, Vivekananda appeared in their midst. That was the beginning of a new age. Like a hurricane he rushed from place to place planting the seeds of his message. Behind his words was immense spiritual power and his lectures burnt their way into the brains of listeners and they could not get away from them. In the

words of Romain Rolland, touching his words means receiving a thrill in the body like an electric shock.

Swamiji had twin important messages to broadcast to the world: The divinity of each soul and the harmony of all faiths. He said, "My idea can be put into a few words and that is: to preach unto mankind their divinity and how to make it manifest in every movement of life." Behind all his actions and utterances this theme ran as an undercurrent. Vivekananda urged people to follow any path, belong to any faith or sect, practise any method and manifest their Godliness which is inherent in them.

Vivekananda is limitless; even to have a limited glance of him is a blessing. Hope this small book will fulfil that wish.

Swami Muktirupananda,
President,
Ramakrishna Mission
179, Bartley Road, Singapore 539784

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA - A Life Sketch

K.S.C Pillai

On 11 September 1893 a young monk from India thrilled a large and distinguished audience at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago with his brief, but stirring address on Hinduism, stressing its basic tenet that all religions are true.

Swami Vivekananda underpinned his statement with this quotation from the Bhagavad Gita, "Whosoever comes to me, through whatever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to Me." (1)

As he concluded his seven-minute address, the large assembly rose to its feet and wildly cheered the Swami, an honour none of the other delegates seems to have been accorded.

Who is this monk who reached America with no proper credentials, not enough money or any friends?

Narendranath Datta was born on 12 January 1863 as the eldest son of Viswanath Datta, a successful Calcutta lawyer, and his wife Bhuvaneswari. Viswanath Datta was a cultured man with deep interest in music and other arts while his wife was a keen worshipper of Lord Vireswara (Siva) of Kasi.

High-spirited and active, Narendra was a boy of exceptional intelligence and prodigious memory. While in college he read a variety of books outside his curriculum. History and Philosophy were his favourite subjects. Apart from scholastic excellence, he was also active in Sports and displayed interest in spiritual matters.

At the time the Reform movement was quite active in Bengal with several well-educated society leaders criticizing the widely-accepted concept of Gods, image worship, child marriage etc. On the other hand, Hinduism was under attack from the British rulers and their supporters. Narendra, who was influenced by reformist leaders such as Keshab Chandra Sen and Sivanath Sastri of the Brahmo Samaj, was keen to find out from them whether any of them had any direct experience of God. Their response did not satisfy him.

One day his college principal William Hastie was explaining the meaning of ecstasy in a Wordsworth

poem and mentioned that Sri Ramakrishna, a priest at the Kali Temple in Dakshineswar, had experienced ecstasies. A few days later they happened to meet at a religious festival and Sri Ramakrishna invited Narendra to Dakshineswar.

Narendra went to Dakshineswar in November 1881, a meeting that was to lead to drastic changes in his life. "Have you seen God?" asked Narendra. "Yes!" came the emphatic reply. "I have seen God as I see you. God can be seen and spoken with, just as I am seeing you, but who wants to do it?"

On his second visit Sri Ramakrishna placed his right hand on Narendra's body. He recalls his feeling that all the things in the room including the walls were whirling and disappearing. He was overwhelmed and cried out loudly, "What have you done? I have my parents, you know." Sri Ramakrishna laughed and touched Narendra's chest and said, "Let it cease now. ...It will come to pass in course of time...I came to my normal state." These experiences kept Narendra thinking deeply trying to determine whether it was mesmerism, hypnotism or something he did not know.

Meanwhile, Sri Ramakrishna was also scrutinizing the young man's "credentials". One day he put him in



Ancestral house of Swami Vivekananda in Kolkata where he was born on 12 January 1863



This is the original shrine of the Belur Math where Swami Vivekananda installed the relics of Sri Ramakrishna



Room in Belur Math, where Swamiiji passed away on 4 July 1902



The Art institute building in Chicago where Swamiiji delivered his first famous address on 11 September 1893

a kind of trance and intuited that Narendra was a sage who had come down to earth to help humanity, particularly in the spiritual field. On his part Narendra accepted Sri Ramakrishna as his Guru, reversing his earlier rejection of the concept of Guru as "a slavish subjection to another fallible human being like oneself."

It would seem that both of them carried out their own "tests" before the relationship matured. After all, Sri Ramakrishna used to tell his disciples that they must test him "like a moneylender does the coins" before accepting him as their Guru.

The sudden death of Viswanath Datta, leaving behind large debts, placed a huge burden on Narendra, the eldest son, who had just completed his university examination. His efforts to find a job proved unsuccessful. His quest for help brought him in contact with people of doubtful character and reports of this reached Sri Ramakrishna, but he was not influenced.

After a while Narendra decided to seek Sri Ramakrishna's help in the family problem. The Master told him that he was not born to lead a worldly life but was ordained to serve humanity. Sri Ramakrishna then prayed to Mother Kali and assured Narendra that the minimum needs of the family would be taken care of.

This was a turning point in Narendra's life. He spent the next five years with Sri Ramakrishna during which period he received exemplary spiritual training and was moulded into a world-ranking sannyasin. About a dozen other young men, who had responded to the call to renounce the world and serve the people, also joined what was to become the Ramakrishna Order.

About 1885, Sri Ramakrishna's throat infection was diagnosed as cancer, necessitating his transfer from Dakshineswar to a private residence where proper attention could be given. During this period Sri Ramakrishna had given indications that he was an Incarnation of the Divine. Narendra one day decided to verify this statement. Even as he was mulling over it, Sri Ramakrishna told him, "O, Naren, are you not yet convinced? He who was Rama, He who was Krishna, He Himself is now Ramakrishna in this body."

During this period Sri Ramakrishna had anointed Narendra as the leader of the group. He described Narendra as a wide-spreading tree that gave protection to weary travellers.

Sri Ramakrishna passed away on 16 August 1886. Under Narendra's leadership, the group moved to a dilapidated house, took monastic vows and pledged

to serve fellow humans. They also took monastic names, Narendra became Swami Vivekananda. Soon he set out as a wandering monk, the traditional habit of Indian monks as against the householder who "settles down." During his wanderings he normally spent the nights at temples or free lodges, but was also occasionally the honored guest of Rulers and Princes.

Towards the end of 1891, he had been told of the Parliament of Religions to be held in Chicago two years later. As days passed he heard more about it. As he was meditating at Kanyakumari, the southernmost part of India, in early 1893, he seems to have had a symbolic dream in which he saw Sri Ramakrishna walking from the seashore to the ocean beckoning him to follow. His devotees and friends raised some money and finally he set sail from Bombay in May 1893 for America via Singapore and Japan.

The Swami reached America towards the end of July 1893. Two shocks awaited him when he arrived in Chicago: the Parliament of Religions was scheduled for September and he would need proper credentials from a recognized religious organization to be admitted. He had also no means to support himself for two months in that expensive country.

Vivekananda came across some extremely helpful people who facilitated his accreditation, helped with his lodging and travel, though he also had first-hand experience of the Moorish behavior of some color-conscious Americans.

On 11 September 1893 began the Parliament of Religions in the Hall of Columbus, a part of the World's Colombian Exhibition with representatives from all the major religions of the world on the stage. During the 18-day session, the Swami made six speeches and presented a lengthy treatise on Hinduism. He emerged from the conference as the most favorite speaker.

The Swami spent a little over two years traveling in parts of the United States, giving lectures, parlor talks and group classes for earnest devotees. He developed close rapport with various thinkers and intellectuals. The publications based on his talks include Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga and Raja Yoga. The first permanent Vedanta Centre outside India was established in New York.

He then visited England and Europe on a similar mission where he met and made lasting friendship with distinguished Indologists such as Prof Max Muller and Prof Paul Deussen. A Vedanta Centre was established

in London. During all these visits his emphasis was on real India, its civilization, spirituality and warned against instant judgements predicated on poverty, squalor and superstition. Swamiji was not against development; indeed he praised the West for its organization and discipline that helped economic progress.

After more than three years abroad, the Swami made a triumphant return to the East, landing in Colombo early 1897. The reception there was feisty with rose water, flowers, incense and above all enthusiastic crowds. The triumphal mood became more intense as he reached India with huge processions, reception and presentation of addresses in many southern cities. The general tenor of his addresses was the urgency to build a society which harnessed Indian spirituality with Western technical advancement. He also told the people that the main aim of his visit to the West was not the Parliament of Religions but to seek resources from the West to hasten Indian development.

In Calcutta, his home-city, a mammoth reception that dwarfed the ones in the South, awaited him. Back home one of the first things he did was to find a suitable resting place for Sri Ramakrishna's relics which were kept in an old building. The Belur Math, built in 1899, was also to become the Centre from which Sri

Ramakrishna's teachings were to radiate throughout the world. Shortly after the establishment of the Math, which was to promote spiritual and monastic work, the Ramakrishna Mission was founded to provide social, educational and other assistance to the people, particularly the poorer section. In this the Swami faced some resistance from his conservative colleagues who questioned the propriety of monks engaging in any activity other than monastic, but this was overcome with his dynamism and reasoning. The motto that "Work is Worship" became a part of the organization.

In the next two years the Swami played host to many devotees and well-wishers from America and Europe, often travelling with them to holy places such as Amarnath, Mayavati, Kshirbhavani etc. His health was affected by his hectic activities. He was diagnosed with asthma and diabetes for which there was no known cure at that time. His doctors advised a change of climate and a long sea voyage. The Swami was also thinking of a trip to see how the work he initiated was progressing.

He set sail in June 1899 and after a short stop in London went to America. He was pleased that the New York Centre was doing very well. During his talks there he was glad to see not

only his old admirers but several new seekers.

The Swami returned to India at the very end of 1900 and reached Belur Math, unannounced, after dusk as the monastics were having their dinner. Early next year he executed a Trust Deed transferring Belur Math and its assets from his name to a Board of Trustees. In December that year Mahatma Gandhi, who was in Calcutta for a meeting, called on the Swami. An old friend from Japan, Mr Okakura visited him to invite him to Japan. The Swami accompanied him to Bodh Gaya, the place of Buddha's enlightenment, which incidentally was the first pilgrimage he made during his early days with Sri Ramakrishna.

On his Mahasamadhi day, 4 July 1902, he got up very early, entered the shrine room, closed all doors and windows and spent three hours in meditation. Then he came to the dining hall and took his lunch with his brother monks breaking the habit of eating in his room. After lunch, he took a class on Sanskrit grammar for Brahmacharis (novice monks) lasting nearly three hours after which he took a stroll with a brother monk.

At vesper time he retired to his room and sat in meditation for an hour. Then he stretched himself on a bed on the floor asking his disciple to fan him. About an hour

later the disciple noticed the Swami's hands shaking a little; Then came two deep breaths; And the end.

The curtain was drawn on this illustrious son of India. But as he said before his death, "I shall not cease to work. I shall inspire men everywhere until the world shall know that it is one with God."

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by Swami Tapasyananda
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The Panchamukha Siva Linga at the Ottapalam Ramakrishna Ashrama Siva Temple



Five different portraits of Swami Vivekananda

Vedanta Kesari - **The Lion of Vedanta**

Those who accept divine incarnations believe also that like Sri Sankara, Swami Vivekananda was an incarnation of Lord Shiva, the fountain-head of knowledge and wisdom. There is this difference, however, that while Sri Sankara was the embodiment of just one aspect of Lord Shiva, the *eka-mukha-Shiva*, Swami Vivekananda was the personification of the five-faced Shiva, the *pancha-mukha-Shiva*. In all his life and works, Sri Sankara presented the ideal of an Advaita-acharya, the teacher of the doctrine of monism, but precious little else. Swamiji, on the other hand, was a many-splendored miracle of a man, a wondrous diamond scattering rays of rare luminosity all around. He was an 'orator by divine right', an able organizer, a great humanist, a philosopher and religious teacher of exceptional

dignity and skill, and a Hindu monk as well as yogi of towering spiritual realization. Besides, he stood as the bridge immortal - amrutasya setuh – between the ancient and the modern, the East and the West, religion and science, faith and reason, idealism and practicality as well as between the incisive intellect of Sri Sankara and the measureless heart of Lord Buddha. As Swamiji's French biographer, Romain Rolland aptly points out, "In the two words, equilibrium and synthesis, Vivekananda's constructive genius may be summed up.... He was the personification of the harmony of all human energy." (1)

It was obvious to all that Swamiji was the living exemplar of the gospel of manliness, strength and courage that he preached everywhere, particularly in India. In him could be seen the warrior-spirit (*kshatraveerya*) more than the glow of the Brahmin (*brahma-tejas*). There was an indefinable power and charm in his majestic bearing, kingliness and a leonine spirit about everything that concerned him. Sadhu means a Hindu monk as well as a meek person. Swamiji was no sadhu of the submissive type. Rather, he was formida-

ble, lion-like and even aggressive, if you like. Yet, he was so benevolent and compassionate that he was the refuge to all spiritual seekers.

Swamiji's pre-monastic name, Narendra signified the first, the foremost, and the ruler of men. As a monk, he came to be called *Desikendra*, *Yatiraja*, *Vedanta-Kesari* etc; all showing that he was the king and the lion among the monks as well as religious teachers. The West thought it fit to describe him with the expressive epithets, 'The Hindu Napoleon', 'The cyclonic Hindu', 'Prince Vive-Kanunda' etc. On this aspect of his personality, Romain Rolland observes, "He was a born king and nobody ever came near him either in India or America without paying homage to his majesty... He was a prince despite all disguise". (2) Indeed, Swamiji was a superman, a hero-soul, if ever there was one.

Now, it was Vedanta, no doubt, that he preached both in India and in the West. But it was not the same aspect of Vedanta, or with the same emphasis, that he gave as his message to these two different people. In the Introduction to his com-

mentary on the Bhagavad- Gita, Sri Sankara says, *dwvidho hi vedokto dharmah... abhyudaya- nissreyasa hetuh* – two-fold is the Vedic religion, characterized by action and action-lessness, causing the preservation of the universe and bringing about the material prosperity and spiritual welfare of its beings. The West had reached a high degree of material prosperity to enjoy every kind of comfort and luxury in full measure. But it was utterly poor in religion and spirituality as well as the solace and joy that they offered. Thus, to the West, Swamiji showed the path of action-lessness, the nivritti-marga, Vedanta's pure message of spirituality. It was a call for a life renunciation, of ascetic withdrawal from sense pleasures for participation in the ampler joy of the spirit, the Atman, a call for the recovery of the glory and grandeur of the divinity inherent in man but lost through forgetfulness.

With a rare earnestness of purpose, Swamiji could urge his listeners to give up 'this indecent clinging to life', 'to escape the meshes of maya' and to strive 'for that glorious freedom from life and death' (3). Let us listen to Swamiji's in-

spired words of wisdom as given to us by Sister Christine, a disciple of Swamiji who attended his classes at the Thousand Island Park, "Don't be deceived, Maya is a great cheat. Get out! Do not let her catch you this time... Remember, God is the only Reality. Don't let yourself be tempted by dolls. They are dolls of sugar or dolls of salt, and they will melt and become nothing. Be a king and know your own world. This never comes until you give it up and it ceased to bind. Give up, give up!" (3a). This was the gist of his teachings everywhere in the West. But India, during Swamiji's times, presented an entirely different picture. For one thing she lay prostrate before her foreign masters and rulers. Millions of her people were sunk in ignorance and illness, poverty, starvation and stark misery. Centuries of oppression and tyranny by the rich, the powerful and the privileged orthodoxy had reduced them to the state of animals. Their crying need was food and medicine, not God or religion. And to preach Vedanta to destitute India was indeed a cruel joke. What India needed at that time was not so much as the recovery of their lost soul as sustenance for their body and restoration of

their forgotten human dignity. And so, it was Vedanta's *pravritti marga*, the path of manly action that Swamiji showed to India of his times.

On his triumphal return to India in 1897 after four years of spreading his Master's message in the West, Swamiji was given a tumultuous welcome everywhere throughout his royal progress from Colombo to Almora. Crowds of admiring people drawn from every walk of life were wild with enthusiasm to catch a glimpse of their hero and to listen to his inspiring lectures. Swamiji, on his part, was more than enthusiastic and equal to the occasion which he wanted to convert into a source of self-awareness for his countrymen.

His words were passionate, eloquent and fiery packed with a power and glory that only he could impart. His exhortations had the effect of a thunder-clap or a lion's roar to rouse India from her age-long slumber, indolence and inertia. Swamiji could conjure up the vision of an Immortal India in the hearts of the people, the vision of her glorious past and of greater glory and grandeur for her in the future.

Swamiji's call to India, to her youth in particular, was to acquire strength and fearlessness for manly action. And for this, he wanted them to derive inspiration from the source of these noble virtues, the Upanishads. "If there is one word that you find coming out like a bomb from the Upanishads, bursting like a bombshell upon masses of ignorance, it is the word fearlessness" (4), declared Swamiji at Paramakkudi in Tamil Nadu. In his lecture at Kumbhakonam, Swamiji gave out his message of strength and manliness. "But this is not the time for us to weep even in joy; we have had enough weeping; no more.... What our country now wants are muscles of iron, nerves of steel, a gigantic will which nothing can resist and being able to meet death face to face". (5)

In his Madras lecture, My Plan of Campaign, Swamiji repeats the idea of strength and manliness. He says, "It is man-making religion that we want. It is man-making theories that we want. It is man-making education all round that we want". (6) He reiterates his message of strength in his next lecture, Vedanta and Indian Life, "First of all, our young men must be strong. Religion will

come afterwards. Be strong, my young friends; that is my advice to you.... You will understand the Gita better with your biceps, with your muscles a little stronger... and you feel yourself as men". Thus we have to apply these to our needs. (7)

Again, we hear Swamiji's plea to throw away weakness and invoke the strength inherent in everyone, "Let us proclaim to every soul – Arise, Awake and stop not till the goal is reached! Arise, Awake! Awake from this hypnotism of weakness. No one is really weak; the soul is infinite, omnipotent and omniscient... O ye modern Hindus, de-hypnotize yourselves. The way to do that is found in your own sacred books!"(8)

Words such as these that angels speak must have burnt their way into the hearts of men to startle and enthrall them. These words have not only conveyed the speakers' ideas but also communicated his profound experience to the listeners at a moment or two. One can only echo the delight and wonder of Romain Rolland who estimated the effect of Swamiji's inspiring lectures on the audience, "imagine the

thunderous reverberations of these words!' (9) Today, more than a century after Swamiji spoke to India giving out the new gospel of manliness and strength, the youth of the country appears more than manly, strong and active. However, one wonders whether the "youth-quake" will take India to the grand goal shown by Swamiji.

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- 6)Ibid page 141
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- 8)Ibid page 105
- 9)The life of Vivekananda by R Rolland page 113

The Patriot Saint of India

We have already seen that it was the warrior spirit in Swami Vivekananda, his manliness and majestic self-assurance which won him such honorific titles as the Lion of Vedanta, the Prince among Monks, the Hindu Napoleon and so on. That, however, was only one aspect of his many-sided personality. Another equally glorious and transparent one was his love for his motherland. His pure and peerless patriotism was a source of inspiration to the national leaders of the first generation like Tilak, Gandhiji, Nehru, Netaji Bose, Rajaji and others. No wonder, then that Swamiji is spoken of as the Patriot-Saint of India, the Morning Star of Indian independence, the Prophet of Indian Independence etc.

It is only natural for any Indian to feel that his

Swami Vivekananda as a wandering monk in India

motherland is his highest heaven. No doubt, that was how Swamiji also felt about her. However, it looked as if it was not just that kind of instinctive love; nor the poet's or politicians fitful patriotism. It was far deeper and more fundamental than even the humanistic love and sympathy and indignant resentment that Swamiji felt when he saw his poor, enslaved countrymen in deep distress, sorrow and misery. Sister Nivedita recaptures that attitude of Swamiji in her inimitable, picturesque style, thus: "There was one thing, however, deep in the Master's nature.... This was his love of his country.... The thought of India to him was like the air he breathed.... The queen of his adoration was his motherland. Like some delicately-poised bell, thrilled and vibrated by every sound that falls upon it, was his heart to all that concerned her. Not a sob was heard within her shores that did not find in him a responsive echo. There was no cry of fear, no tremor of weakness, no shrinking from mortification that he had not known and understood. He was hard on her sins, unsparing on her want of worldly wisdom...."

(1) This burning concern for the poor, suffer-

ing millions of Indians finds its echoes, loud and clear, in his Letters and Lectures.

However the basic inspiration for Swamiji's patriotism came from his vision of an Immortal India, an India sustained by her age-old religiouspiritual culture which was, as it were, her heart beat and life breath. He looked upon India as the *punya-bhoomi* of the whole world, the blessed land that had given birth to god-men and world teachers of religion and philosophy. It continued to be the holy land of men who readily renounced their all in their quest for God and so, it was the gateway to liberation for all the souls in bondage. This was the burden of Swamiji's thoughts on India and the soul of his love for her.

What Swamiji succeeded in doing by means of his Letters and Lectures was to inspire the people by awakening in them the strong feeling that they were the proud inheritors of the priceless legacy of a civilisation and culture unique in the world. Political freedom and socio-economic progress for India in this context were not only useful but indispensable so far

as they would give the people the much-needed opportunity to preserve and strengthen their spiritual heritage so that India would be more than ready to fulfill her God-given mission of showing the Celestial Light to the world groping in darkness. It is in this light that Swamiji's patriotic utterances and exhortations have to be understood and their significance appreciated. For example, let us take his Ramnad lecture where he was at his eloquent best: "The longest night seems to be passing away, the sorest trouble seems to be coming to an end at last and the seeming corpse appears to be awaking.... She is awakening, this motherland of ours, from her deep long sleep. None can resist her anymore; never is she going to sleep anymore; for the infinite giant is rising to her feet". (2)

This prophetic utterance rings in our ears a bell whose sound is deeper and more far-reaching than that of the conventional patriotism we are familiar with. In fact, it has the true ring of goodwill and love reaching out to the whole of humanity spelt out again in his letter to the Hindus of Madras: "But one vi-

sion I see clear as life before me, that the ancient Mother has awakened once more, sitting on her throne – rejuvenated more glorious than even before. Proclaim Her to the whole world with the voice of peace and benediction" (3)

From this, Swamiji's thoughts become clearer - that freedom for India is to be an event of jubilation for the whole world as liberated India will be a boon and a blessing to humanity because her only ambition will be to ensure as well as enhance peace and happiness everywhere.

It is a fact that India is the only country in the world that has shown a passionate clinging to a religio-spiritual way of life all through her long history in total disregard of both the allurements and privations in life. And among the great teachers of religion, it was given to Swamiji to explain with sweet reasonableness the reason for this partiality for religion and God which is our distinctive national characteristic. In a number of lectures, he reiterates in different words and phrases, the same idea that we have no choice in the matter as it is an inviolable law of life which

we can violate only at our own peril. In his Ramnad lecture, Swamiji almost gives a warning to the people in these words, "But mark you, if you give up that spirituality, leaving it aside to go after the materializing civilisation of the West, the result will be that in three generations you will be broken; the foundation upon which the national edifice has been built will be undermined, and the result will be annihilation all round" (4)

Again, in his Madras lecture, My Plan of Campaign, Swamiji continues to deal with the theme in the same manner, "I see that each nation, like each individual, has one theme in this life which is its centre, the principal note round which every other note comes to form the harmony.... In India, religious life forms the centre, the keynote of the whole music of national life.... If you succeed in the attempt to throw off your religion and take up either politics, or society or any other things as your centre, as the vitality of your national life the result will be that you will become extinct. To prevent this you must make all and everything work through that vitality of religion. Let all your nerves vibrate through the backbone of

your religion.... So every improvement in India requires first of all an upheaval in religion". (5)

So then, for Swamiji, patriotism meant his deep love and sympathy for the destitute millions of India, the poor, the lowly and the lost as well as their redemption. However, it meant also a great deal more and in a larger measure as it was his whole-hearted acceptance of her religion and spirituality as the only source of her national vitality and the sure foundation of her reconstruction. Therefore Swamiji's lectures and letters were exhortations to the people of India to preserve their priceless spiritual culture at all costs and thus preserve their national identity as well as their uniqueness as a spiritual race. For example, Swamiji writes to his disciples in Madras, "Keep the motto before you - Elevation of the masses without injuring their religion... Can you raise them? Can you give them back their lost individuality without making them lose their innate spiritual nature?" (6)

He puts the same idea in a different way, as in this letter, "Until all the Hindu race be-

comes extinct... India can never be Europe until she dies"; "India will be raised, not with the power of the flesh, but with the power of the spirit.... with the flag of peace and love, the garb of the Sannyasin; Say not that you are weak. The spirit is omnipotent". (7)

Again with a note of warning "India is immortal as long as she continues her search for God. But if she takes to politics and social conflict she will die". Now shifting the focus a little, Swamiji is equally emphatic in pointing out that adherence to a religio-spiritual way of life is not merely for India's survival as a nation and a race but for the fulfillment of our mission to the world as well. He puts the case a forceful yet winsome way, in his Colombo address:

"What is true of the individual is equally true of the race. Each race, similarly, has a peculiar bent... a peculiar mission to fulfill in the life of the world... Political greatness or military power is never the mission of our race; it never was and, mark my words, it never will be. But there has been another mission given

to us. The Hindu's calm brain must pour out its own quota to give to the sum total of human progress. India's gift to the world is the light spiritual.... Slow and silent, as the gentle dew that falls in the morning, unseen and unheard yet producing the most tremendous result, has been the work of this calm, patient, all suffering, spiritual race upon the world of thought." (9) In words that wing their way into the hearts of men, Swamiji draws the picture of contrast between how the other races and India have given life-giving ideas and thoughts to the world. The others have done it "with the blast of war trumpets and with the march of embattled cohorts," "soaked in a deluge of blood; the blood of millions of our fellow-beings", "followed by the groans of millions by the wails of orphans, by the tears of widows"....but India has for thousands of years peacefully existed... every word that has been spoken by her has blessings behind it and peace before it." (9)

In this context, therefore, Swamiji's call to the nation is to fulfill her mission to the world by distributing her cultural wealth to the spir-

itually poor and needy people of the world:

“The whole world requires Light. It is expectant! India alone has that Light, not in magic mummeries and charlatanism but in the teaching of the glories of the spirit of real religion -- of the highest spiritual truth. That is why the Lord has preserved the race through all the vicissitudes unto the present day. Now the time has come”. (1 0)

Swamiji speaks out his idea again in explicit terms, “ It is not only that we must revive our own country -- that is a small matter, I am an imaginative man --- and my idea is the conquest of the whole world by the Hindu race... we also have been great conquerors... the conquest of religion and of spiritualists. Once more the world must be conquered by India... Up, India, and conquer the world with your spiritualists” (11)

Swamiji describes the plight of the world in the event of India failing to fulfill her God-ordained mission by going the Western way and thereby inviting her own death.

“Shall India die? Then from the world all spirituality will be extinct, all moral perfection will be extinct, all sweet souled sympathy for religion will be extinct, all ideality will be extinct and in its place will reign the duality of lust and luxury as the male and female deities, with money as its priest, fraud, force and competition its ceremonies and the human soul its sacrifice. Such a thing can never be.” (12)

No doubt, it is the terrifying picture of a cannibal island or of a forest of wild animals that Swamiji has painted here. But when one sees the picture of free India where the people behave like a rootless race, one wonders whether Swamiji's vision of an Immortal India will ever be realised. Only time can tell, one way or the other. Jai Ramakrishna!

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Worshipper of the Poor and Down-trodden

With his maiden speech at the Chicago Parliament of Religions lasting but a brief five minutes or less, the unknown monk from India became the world-renowned Swami Vivekananda. Besides, Hinduism came to be accepted as the Mother of Religions and Swamiji himself venerated as the world-teacher of Vedanta. This, indeed, was a unique victory which perhaps far exceeded the wildest expectations of Swamiji himself. In any case, it gave him the much-needed badge of authority of an āchārya, greatly helping him in spreading the message of his Master in the West. No doubt, it was only a beginning, but a beginning, all the same, of immense consequence and unthinkable for Swamiji to make in India.

However, anything like a systematic work on

a permanent basis had to wait till 1897, a few months after Swamiji's triumphal return to India, when he founded the Sri Ramakrishna Math and Mission whose motto was, *ātmano mokshārtham jagat hitāya ca* - for one's own liberation and for the welfare of the world. This was Swamiji's real victory, less dramatic perhaps, but certainly more important than the one achieved in Chicago, for this ensured the fulfilment of his mission in life. Moreover, the motto of the religious organisation founded by him made it clear that the physical wants of the poor and the needy were as important as the spiritual needs of the aspirants. Procuring food, clothing, medicine etc, to the sick and the suffering was as much as the Mission's concern as bringing spiritual solace to the seekers of God. Service to the lowly and the lost, accepted as an integral part of spiritual discipline, was a bold step, a novel experiment in Hindu monasticism.

Service to the poor as conceived by Swamiji was no ordinary social work but an essential part of spiritual discipline called *Sevā-Sādhana*. It was training the mind to see Shiva in every

Jiva (man) and to worship the God in him. It was practical Vedanta, the effort to realise the Vedantic vision of seeing every (human) being not as a physical entity but as the indwelling divinity. To Swamiji himself, service to man as worship to the God in him was no theory but its realisation. Therefore, he gave it the apt epithet, *Daridra-Nārāyana-Pooja*, worship of the poor Nārāyana (God). It became immediately popular and roused the people from their age-old slumber. As Romain Rolland says, "He had a genius for arresting words and burning phrases hammered out white-hot in the forge of his soul so that they transpierced thousands. The one that made the deepest impression was the famous phrase: "*Daridra Narayana*" (the beggar God)." (1)

However, it was not all that easy for Swamiji who had a time of it with his Gurubhais some of whom argued that God-realisation and not service to the poor was the core of Sri Gurumaharaj's teachings. Swamiji clarified that his basic inspiration for *Sevā-Sādhana* had come from the advice given by Sri Gurumaharaj Himself to a group of Vaishnava devotees. "*Jiva* is



A Hospital ward in Varanasi Seva Ashrama



A Mobile Medical Unit in India



Ramakrishna Mission Seva Pratishthan hospital,
Kolkata, India



Student Nurses with lamps in hands take vows in Sanskrit at the
capping ceremony of the School of Nursing

Shiva (all living beings are God). Who then dare talk of showing mercy to them? Not mercy, but service, service. For man must be regarded as God.” (2) Finally, Swamiji was able to convince his *Gurubhais* and win their whole-hearted support which was no small achievement.

There were a few contributory factors as well, helping the concept of *Sevā-Sādhana* to become a practical, functional spiritual programme. Of these, the most important one was Swamiji’s noble nature marked by profound love and compassion for the poor anywhere in the world. The Catholicity of his divinised humanism was reflected in his letters written to E.T.Sturdy and Mary Hale - “What is India, or England, or America to us? We are the servants of that God who by the ignorant is called MAN.” (3) Again, “... and above all, my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, of all species, is the special object of my worship.” (4)

Swamiji’s experience as a wandering monk was a determining factor. It brought him into direct contact with the poor, down-trodden millions

and their appalling, unending misery which cried out for urgent redress. In spite of his best efforts, help was not forthcoming from any quarter. And what could a nameless, penniless monk do except to shed ‘tears such as angels weep’, tears of his heart’s blood. It dawned on him that what India then needed was not religion and spirituality, but food, clothes, medicines and the like - first food, then religion.

It was this Buddha-heart that spoke to Swami Turiyananda in tearful words and in a choked voice shortly before he left for America - “Haribhai, I am still unable to understand anything of your so-called religion. But my heart has expanded very much and I have learnt to feel (the suffering of others). Believe me, I feel intensely indeed.” (5)

Belief in the futility of religion in the context of India’s poverty and misery continued to receive emphatic re-endorsements from time to time at the hands of Swamiji, in words like these - “... But I am poor, I love the poor... Who feels for them? Let these people be your God - think of them, work for them... Him I call a *Mahātman* (great

soul) whose heart bleeds for the poor, otherwise he is a *Durātman* (wicked soul)." (6) Again, "I do not believe in a God or religion which cannot wipe the widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth... Where should you go to seek for God - are not all the poor, the miserable, the weak Gods? Why not worship them first?" (7) "For the next fifty years, this alone shall be our keynote - this, our great Mother India. Let all other vain Gods disappear for the time from our minds." (8) "As long as a stray dog goes hungry in my country, my whole religion is to feed it."

The third factor was Swamiji's American experience. But what made him go to America? Let Swamiji speak: "I did not go to America, as most of you know, for the Parliament of Religions... I travelled twelve years all over India, finding no way to work for my countrymen, and that is why I went to America. Who cared about this Parliament of Religions? Here was my own flesh and blood sinking every day." (9) Swamiji was even more forthright in his letter to Swami Ramakrishnananda, "I next travelled in search of funds, but do you think the

people of India were going to spend money? Therefore I have come to America, to earn money myself, and then return to my country... As our country is poor in social virtues, so this country is lacking in spirituality. I give them spirituality and they give me money." (10)

During the four years' stay in America, Swamiji could see for himself the strength and efficiency of organisation. He saw how the Christian missionaries were doing splendid service to the old and the orphaned and even in reclaiming social outcasts like criminals and condemned prisoners to become useful citizens. It encouraged him to think of the possibilities in Indian conditions and of moulding a new order of monks. About his plan, Swamiji wrote to Swami Ramakrishnananda: "The long and short of it is... We as a nation have lost our individuality, and that is the cause of all mischief in India. We have to give back to the nation its lost-individuality and raise the masses." (11) Again to Swami Akhandananda, he wrote, "The Geruā robe is not for enjoyment. It is the banner of heroic work. You must give your body, mind, and speech to the welfare of the world..."

But I say, the poor, the illiterate, the ignorant, the afflicted - let these be your God. Know that service to these alone is the highest religion.” (12)

Swamiji knew well that it was the age-long tyranny of the rich, the orthodox and the priestcraft that reduced the poor in India to ‘next-door neighbours to brutes.’ “The Pharisees and Sadducees in Hinduism, hypocrites who invent all sorts of engines of tyranny in the shape of the doctrines of *Pāramārthika* and *Vyāvahārika*.” (13) But he felt that it was the duty of all to raise the poor to their lost human dignity and freedom. So, he wrote to Alasinga, more in sorrow than in anger, reminding the youth of the country of their duty - “Trust not the so-called rich; they are more dead than alive. The hope lies in you-in the meek, the lowly, but the faithful... I may perish of cold or hunger in this land, but I bequeath to you, young men, this sympathy, this struggle for the poor, the ignorant, the oppressed... Vow, then, to devote your whole lives to the cause of the redemption of these three hundred millions, going down and down everyday.” (14)

Swamiji’s or Sri Gurumaharaj’s idea of *Jagat Hitāya* (for the welfare of the world) could be described also as Karma-yoga or Bhāgavata-dharma, the best and most practical way of worshipping God. Swamiji’s advice to the worshippers at the Rameswaram temple, “He who sees Shiva in the poor... really worships Shiva; and if he sees Shiva only in the image, his worship is but preliminary... He who wants to serve Shiva must serve His Children - must serve all creatures in the world first.” (15) Again, in one of his Madras lectures, “Look upon every man, woman, and every one as God. You cannot help anyone, you can only serve: serve the Children of the Lord, serve the Lord Himself, if you have the privilege... Do it only as a worship. I should see God in the poor, and it is for my salvation that I go and worship them.” (16) This is the living picture of Swami Vivekananda., the worshipper of Daridra-Nārāyanās.

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SWAMI VIVEKANANDA - The Educational Thinker

It is true that Swami Vivekananda was a many-splendoured and ideal hero-figure who drew to himself all those who happened to fall within his magnetic field. But essentially, he was the chief disciple of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna Deva and His apostle who awakened the whole world with his life-giving message of his Master. No doubt, he did glance at a variety of subjects such as the pathetic condition of the Indian masses, the callous indifference of the rich and ruling classes, the tyranny of orthodoxy and exclusiveness freely practised by the Hindu religious leaders and so on. One such subject which engaged his critical and indignant attention was India's educational system.

Of course, Swamiji was no educational expert



Vivekananda University, Belur Math, Kolkata



Ramakrishna Mission School, Kozhikode



The prestigious educational centre of Kolkata -
RKM Institute of Culture



Ramakrishna Mission Boys Home, Singapore



Ramakrishna Mission WINGS Counselling Centre &
Sarada Kindergarten, Singapore

in technical terms. However, it was from the vantage point of the Vedantic outlook that he examined India's educational scene as he did all other matters. Therefore, Swamiji's educational vision, both at the conceptual and implementational levels, achieved an integration and rounded perfection sadly lacking in our educational system. Incidentally, it might be pertinent to point out here that our educational planners and administrators would do well to make a deep study of Swamiji's thought on education, particularly in the context of the all-round anarchy prevailing in our academic field.

No wonder of it, because education in Independent India is just a continuation of the old English system without any correction in terms of educational goals or methods of teaching. And Swamiji was never tired of pointing out its defects and inadequacies and their ruinous effects on the Indian youth. "In the first place," says Swamiji, "it is not a man-making education, it is merely and entirely a negative education... The child is taken to school and the first thing he learns is that his father is a fool, By the time he is sixteen, he is

a mass of negation, lifeless and boneless. And the result is that fifty years of such education has not produced one original man in the three Presidencies..." (1) He draws our attention to the same deficiency again, "Take your universities. What have they done during the fifty years of their existence? They have not produced one original man. They are merely an examining body." (2)

However, it was in his letter addressed to his friends in Madras from Yokohama that Swamiji had voiced his indignant protest against the evil impact of English education on the Indian youth when he became sadly conscious of the progressive outlook of the Japanese in sharp contrast to that of the Indian: "Come, see these people, and then go and hide your faces in shame. A race of dotards... What are you? And what are you doing now? ... Promenading the seashores with books in your hands – repeating undigested stray bits of European brainwork... Is there not water enough in the sea to drown you, books, gowns, university diplomas, and all?" (3) Swamiji found that the English system of education in India was a failure because it failed to make the educated

self-reliant, manly and resourceful; it failed to endow the students with essential human virtues like a reverence for life, love and sympathy and fellow-feeling and a sense of renunciation and service for the well-being of society. In short, there was nothing Indian in our education; it was all English or European, body and soul.

And Swamiji was quick and ready to show us a way out of this predicament, this educational calamity. "The ideal, therefore," says Swamiji, "is that we must have the whole education of our country, spiritual and secular, in our own hands, and it must be on national lines, through national methods as far as practical." (4) However, he strikes a note of warning to the would-be educational planners of India, "... but if you attempt to get the secular knowledge without religion, I tell you plainly, vain is your attempt in India, it will never have a hold on the people. Even the great Buddhistic movement was a failure, partially on account of that." (5)

At the same time, Swamiji's approach to education was very different from that of the orthodox,

partisan enthusiasts who stood for 'Sanskrit and Vedic education only'! It was very liberal, balanced and practical, an educational philosophy in which the secular and the spiritual were held in a happy harmony. "What we want are western science coupled with Vedanta, *brahmacharya* as the guiding motto, and also *sraddha*... But the root is religion. Religion is the rice, and everything else, like curries." (6) Here, one is inclined to make more than a passing remark that in Independent India when we had the freedom to fashion our educational system with Indian-ness at the core, both in letter and in spirit, as was shown by Swamiji, it was a thousand pities that we let slip that opportunity in the name of secularism and a composite culture! Consequently, education, which should be the key to the solution of all national problems itself became the most vexing national problem, the epicentre of violent 'youth-quakes' in our country!!

Now then, Swamiji's justly famous definition, "Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man." (7) brings into focus his faith in the Vedantic truth that, as in the case of

divinity, perfection or fullness of knowledge is already and always lodged in man. No one can or need give to man any knowledge which is not already in him. In fact, education is not so much a process of putting in as of taking out, not stuffing the brain but training the mind. All growth is from within to without which is true also in the case of the growth of one's knowledge into fullness. It is like the growth of a plant, says Swamiji, which is determined solely by the innate strength and vitality of the plant. All that the gardener can do is to give it some negative help in the form of removing the stones and thorns, the grass and weeds that choke its growth as well as watering and manuring it. But for all that, the growing has to be done by the plant itself. So also in education, the teacher and the text-books, noble thoughts and ideas only help as in removing what covers and hides the knowledge within us and prevents it from revealing itself. They, no doubt, are strong promptings in awakening the 'educability' in us. But what really matters is the flaming up of the inner illumination, the fire of knowledge leaping up from within us. It is as Swamiji puts it, "We are to

put the chemicals together, crystallisation will be done by nature according to her laws" (8)

Again, the process of education is very much like the digging of a well. By digging, we do not produce even a drop of water; digging helps us only to reach the water already stored up deep down the earth. It removes the layers of mud and sandstones which cover up the under-water stream, and we find the water already existing there. In other words, digging only helps us in un-covering the hidden water storage. The same is true with education in which we dig and dive deep within ourselves to discover or make manifest the knowledge already within us. Here, the sharp drilling instrument used to discover the Light within is our own concentrated mind. Swamiji illustrates the point with Newton's discovery of the Law of Gravitation. Where did the scientist get the law from – from the earth or from the apple that fell on his head or from his hairless head? From nowhere except from within himself with the help of his own concentrated mind. The falling of the apple only prompted him to go on an enquiry within. This is the process of education,

secular or spiritual, as visualised by Swamiji. As a wandering monk, Swamiji could see for himself the large-scale poverty and misery of the Indian masses. So pitiable was their condition that they hardly thought that they were human beings. Swamiji thought that they were in that plight primarily for want of proper education. And when he saw the progress and prosperity of America largely linked to the education her people were getting, he was convinced that India's salvation lay in giving education to her ignorant millions. "The chief cause of India's ruin has been the monopolising the whole education and intelligence of the land... among a handful of men. If we are to rise again, we shall have to do it in the same way i.e., by spreading education among the masses." (9) Swamiji was mainly concerned with the condition of the masses. "Can you raise them?" he asks. "Can you give them back their lost individuality without making them lose their innate spiritual nature?" (10) Again, "A few thousand graduates do not make a nation... Ninety percent of our people are without education – who thinks of that – these Babus, the so-called patriots?" (11)

Swamiji now goes on to define the educational objectives relevant to Indian conditions. He says, "We must have life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas." (12) This statement looks simple enough, but in terms of the goals it sets down, it is comprehensive. It speaks of three essential functions which any system of education worth its name should perform. Education at least must give to the student enough knowledge and skill as to make him self-reliant and resourceful in order to enable him to earn his livelihood with the sweat of his honest brows. Manly independence is the hall-mark of an educated person. The next higher function of education is to make him a man of character, i.e., one endowed with a socially-oriented will. His motto in life will be renunciation of self-interest for the sake of offering loving service to others. He will be concerned more and more with the performance of his duties to society than with the enjoyment of his rights and privileges.

The primary goal of education is to earn enough strength and skill for survival. When that is en-

sured, the next one is to scatter the grains in society from where he has gathered them. These two goals are associated with the social life of man. But the highest educational goal is to reach the state of the man of wisdom which is a whole heaven above the loyalties and affiliations pertaining to society. That is where the lower education, *aparā-vidya*, leads man to the threshold of the education par excellence, the *parā-vidya*, which is phrased by Swamiji as the “life-building assimilation of ideas.” This is reaching perfection, the summit of life’s fulfilment, by the progressive unfoldment of the knowledge inherent in man. This is attained by a ‘voyage within’ and by overcoming the forces of our own inner nature by the process of refinement and culture.

Human life moves at three levels – the physical and sensate, the mental and intellectual and finally, of the soul or spiritual. It is like the movement of the three hands in a wrist-watch. The hour hand moves the slowest, almost imperceptibly; but its movement is the determining factor in telling the time. Similar is the spiritual level of life in determining the true measure of

man, which is not the much-glorified egocentric individuality but the egoless personality or the universality of man. This can be attained not by the information-gathering education but by the one that transforms man’s being, or by the ‘life-building assimilation of ideas’ as Swamiji puts it. “To me”, says he, “the very essence of education is concentration of mind, not collecting facts.” (13) He touches on the same point again in a half-humorous, half-scornful vein, “If education is identical with information, the libraries are the greatest sages in the world, and encyclopedias are the Rishis.” (14)

And, how do we get this kind of real education; what is the method, the way of getting properly educated? Swamiji says, “My idea of education is personal contact with the teacher – *guru-grha-vāsa*. Without the personal life of a teacher, there would be no education.” (15) Life with the teacher and constant companionship with him enables the student to absorb and assimilate the noble thoughts and ideas lived by the teacher. The teacher not only conveys ideas but communicates the experience of an ideal life

to the pupil. Like the good seed, the fertile soil and the expert farmer coming together to yield a rich harvest, guru-grha-vāsa brings together a good student, a conducive atmosphere and a great teacher to yield a rich educational harvest. By this method, the student is able to get his own torch lit directly from the brightly-burning torch of the teacher. In short, the most effective method of getting education is sat-sang, companionship with the teacher, like what Swamiji, 'M', Girish and others got from the great Master

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Interpreter of the Life and Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna

We have already seen that Swami Vivekananda held the several aspects of his towering personality in a splendid harmony. With admiring eyes, the world looked upon him as a hero-soul and a superman; as ‘an orator by divine right’, the Lion of Vedanta, the Patriot Monk of India, an awakener of human souls, an educational visionary, a Humanist and a champion of lowly and the lost, a religious reformer and so on and on. Truly, he was all these – and more. No doubt towards the close of his life, when he had almost fulfilled his life’s mission, the feeling began to come upon him that he was a simple child of Sri Ramakrishna. “After all, Joe”, Swamiji wrote to Miss Josephine Macleod in 1900, “I am only the boy who used to listen with rapt wonderment to the wonderful words of Sri Ram-



The decorated marble image of Sri Ramakrishna in the Belur Math Temple, India

akrishna under the banyan at Dakshineswar.

That is my true nature; Work and activities, doing good and so forth are all superimpositions.”(1) During the years of his active life however his attitude was that he was the chief disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and the interpreter of his life and teachings. That was the essential Swami Vivekananda and the most significant and fruitful aspect of his personality.

To Sri Ramakrishna, religion meant the path leading to God as well as God-realisation. It was seeking God and seeing him, touching and feeling Him and conversing with Him as with one's companion with the concreteness and clarity of a sense perception. Again, He knew that the path leading to God as well as the nature of God-realisation could be many and varied, depending upon the method of seeking as also the ability and temperament of the seeker. He declared this grand truth in this simple phrase, “As many faiths, so many paths”. However, it had the strength of a scriptural sanction and a divine injunction as it was tested on the touchstone of his experience



Ramakrishna Temple at Belur Math gleaming in crimson rays of the rising sun.



Sarada Devi Temple and Brahmananda Temple at Belur Math on the bank of Ganga

and found true. Sri Ramakrishna's life was a vast spiritual laboratory in which he conducted experiments on all forms of religion, Indian and foreign alike, and found out that every one of them, if followed faithfully, would lead to God-realisation. There was no form of spiritual discipline that he did not successfully practice, nor any godhead whose vision he did not have during the period of his Sadhana life. Therefore, his innocent looking declaration "As many faiths, so many paths" should be taken as the quintessence of the universal religion he lived. He sought to point out the inevitability of religious tolerance and the harmony of all religions for the good of mankind. To act upon the belief that 'My religion and my God alone are true' was to go against the spirit of religion, besides denying God his infinitude and the inexhaustibility of his ways to man.

Sri Ramakrishna's coming into the midst of men was like a king in disguise moving about among his subjects. There was nothing spectacular that one could notice in the uneventful life of a temple priest. Very few among his devotees and disciples could get anything more than fleeting

glimpses of his grandeur. Only Swamiji could look with unblinking eyes at the spiritual sun that shone at Dakshineswar and come to know that its effulgence was soon to envelop the whole world. Had it not been for Swamiji; his coming and going would have gone practically unnoticed. Swamiji alone was able to understand the incomparable excellence of the Master's life and teachings as well as their pervasive and penetrative impact on the world to last for centuries. It was given to him to mould the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna belonging to the inner circle into an altogether novel monastic order capable of fulfilling its universal mission based on the all-embracing life and message of Sri Ramakrishna. The most important lesson that Swamiji would have learnt from Sri Ramakrishna could well have been that God-realisation was the primary concern of religion and that if that condition were to be fulfilled, religious tolerance and harmony, love for fellow-beings and all other virtues necessary for human welfare would naturally follow.

Conversely, religion without God-realisation would merely be a religious skeleton and its

inevitable concomitants would be sects and schisms, the exclusive-ness of orthodoxy, the intolerance and tyranny of priest craft and such other evils alien to true religion. Or, it could well degenerate into meaningless ritualism or interminable scholastic disputations and such other absurd futilities. Such indeed was the sorry state of affairs in which Swamiji found religion everywhere. The remedy lay in reforming religion patterned on the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. "This World", Swamiji cautioned Sister Nivedita, "is in chains of superstition... Religions of the world have become lifeless mockeries. What the world wants is Character." (2) It was Swamiji's conviction that the future of religion depended on men of character, of purity and holiness of life marked by intense longing for God and by steadfast and singleminded devotion in seeking Him for which Sri Ramakrishna would be the ideal suited for this age.

In a letter addressed to his Gurubhais Swamiji wrote: "in point of character, Paramahansa Deva beats all previous records; and as regards teaching, he was more liberal, more original... this

is the new religion of this age --- the synthesis of Yoga, knowledge, have all been synthesised in the person of Sri Ramakrishna." (3) Swamiji found out that the Hinduism in vogue suffered from several defects and drawbacks such as a severe one-sidedness, excessive individualism, the 'Kadapina' orthodoxy and conservatism, the frog-in-the well narrowness in outlook, dogmatism and bigotry, too much of the head and too little of the heart, idealism at the expense of practicality and many more such hidden dangers.

He knew that the key to the solution of all these problems was the acceptance of the ideal life of Sri Ramakrishna and the application of his life-giving teachings in our day-to-day life. In his letter to Kidi, his Madras devotee, Swamiji pointed out why the Neo-Vedanta lived by the Master should serve as the proper corrective to the inadequacies and weakness of Hinduism, ".... I agree with you so far that faith is a wonderful insight and that it alone can save; but there is in it the danger of breeding fanaticism barring further progress. Jnana is all right, but there is the danger of its becoming dry intellectualism. Love

is great and noble, but it may die away in meaningless sentimentalism. A harmony of all these is the thing required. Ramakrishna was such a harmony. Such beings are few and far between; but keeping him and his teachings as the ideal we can move... God though everywhere, can be known to us through human character. No character was ever so perfect as Ramakrishna and that should be the centre round which we ought to rally." (4) This it would appear was Swamiji's manifesto of his religious reforms. "Whether we call it Vedantism or any ism", Swamiji wrote to Mohammed Hussain of Naini Tal, "the truth is that Advaitism is the last word of religion and thought and the only position from where one can look upon all religions and sects with love. I believe it is the religion of future enlightened humanity... Mankind ought to be taught that religions are but the varied expressions of THE RELIGION, which is Oneness, so that each may choose the path that suits him best." (5) This should be looked upon as Swamiji's summing-up of the central message of Sri Ramakrishna — His universalism. Krishna, Buddha, Christ or Allah are but the many names of the one God

just as Brahminism, Buddhism, Christianity or Islam are the different names of the One religion. The sun and its rays are one even as the sea and its waves are one. But if the world were to live in Harmony and peace without religious dissension and strife it would have to come to recognize and accept a universal religion. It was this message of Sri Ramakrishna, the embodiment of the harmony of all religions, which Swamiji put forward eloquently towards the close of his Paper on Hinduism read at the Parliament of Religions: "... If there is ever to be a universal religion, it must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike; which will not be Brahminic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan but the sum total of all those and still have infinite space for development... It will be a religion which will have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, which will recognize divinity in every man and woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force will be centered in aiding humanity to realize its own

true, divine nature". (6) In his lecture on The Ideal of a Universal Religion, Swamiji made it clear as to what would make a religion universal: "What I want to propagate is a religion that will be acceptable to all minds; it must be equally philosophic, equally emotional, equally mystic and equally conducive to action... And this combination will be the ideal of the nearest approach to a universal religion... To become harmoniously balanced in all these four directions is my ideal religion." (7) From this paraphrase one could clearly infer that what Swamiji had in mind was India's Vedanta with its four-fold path of Karma-Bhakti-Jnana-Yoga to suit the four types of men's minds. As if in further endorsement of this idea, Swamiji wrote to Alasinga : "To put the Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry philosophy and intricate mythology and queer startling psychology, a religion which shall be easy... The dry Advaita must become living – poetic – in everyday life; out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms; and out of bewildering yogism must come the most scientific and practical psychology – and all this must be put in a form so that a

child may grasp it. That is my life's work." (8) Swamiji put the whole idea beyond a shadow of doubt with his famous dictum or definition of religion which should form the four mahavakyas of the universal religion lived and revalidated by Sri Ramakrishna:

- 1) Each soul is potentially divine
- 2) The Goal is to manifest this Divinity within, by controlling nature, external and internal.
- 3) Do this either by work or worship, or psychic-control or philosophy-by one, or more, or all of these-and be free.
- 4) This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms are but secondary details. (9)

Swamiji's Vedanta might be at variance with Sri Sankara's in several respects, because Swamiji did not set much store by scholasticism. He was more concerned with pragmatism and the practicality of religion. And that again, was another hall-

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- 6) Chicago Addresses; Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1968 Pages 36-37
- 7) Quoted from Swami Vivekananda : His life and Mission by Swami Rangathananda, The Ramakrishna Mission, Institute of Culture, Calcutta, 1966 Page 10
- 8) Letters Page 284
- 9) Opening Page of Swamiji's Raja Yoga

Swamiji and Practical Vedanta

Great spiritual masters like Sage Valmiki, Vedavyasa, Lord Buddha and Sri Sankara of bygone days, and Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramana Maharshi in our own times truly belong to the whole world. Yet, we in India claim them as our own, which is as it should be. For, they are the strong pillars of the edifice of our religio-spiritual cultural heritage. It is only proper, then, that we remember them with the respect and reverence which is their due. However, it is found that Swami Vivekananda is singled out as the ideal and hero-figure of an ever-increasing number of people around the world. Nevertheless, not many are seen inclined to understand or accept Swamiji's many-sided personality in toto. For instance, the Hindu nationalists accept him only as the Patriot Saint of India whereas the Socialists look upon him as the cham-



Serving the poor by the monks in South Africa - An early photo



Teaching the kitchen garden skill in South Africa Centre



Vocational training in weaving is given in an Indian Centre of the Ramakrishna Mission



A monk distributing blankets for villagers in Bengal

pion of the oppressed and the down-trodden.

However, what strikes one as strange is that the orthodox school of Vedantic scholars in India are unwilling to consider Swamiji as a thinker and philosopher like Sri Sankara. It fails or refuses to take into account the fact that he was the exponent of the Neo-Vedanta which he had formulated by himself from the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna Deva by way of a correction and continuation of the over-intellectualised traditional Vedanta. It will be of more than passing interest to know something of the philosophical elements novel to the Neo-Vedanta that he preached to the modern world.

Philosophy deals with the creator, the created beings and creation, or more specifically, with God, man and the World, as well as the related theme of man's bondage and his liberation. As an integral part of religion, philosophy aims at helping man in getting release from the painful process of birth and death. But often, it is found to create more heat than light, degenerating into interminable dialectical disputations and invari-

ably ending in bitter quarrels and violent dissent. In Swamiji's view, Philosophy is not dry debates or other exercises in intellectual futility, but that which helps man get an experiential understanding of the ultimate truth. It is not so much theories as their practical application to realise the goal of life which is the justification and fulfillment of any system of philosophy. So then, in Neo-Vedanta the emphasis is on practicality so much that Neo-Vedanta can also be known as Practical Vedanta. Swamiji has given no value to the exhibition of scholarship and intellectualism. In fact, he has been at great pains to free Vedanta from the prison-house of its doctrinal technicalities and the peculiarities of its logic and semantics.

For instance, Swamiji swept away from Vedanta a great deal of the technical and semantic cobwebs like *vyavaharika* (empirical) and *paramarthika* (absolute), *anirvacaneeya* (indeterminate), *mithya-vada* (illusionism), *samuc-cay-vada* (incompatibility between action and knowledge) and so on. He corrected the impression that the philosophy of Vedanta was abstract, obscure and incomprehensible and succeeded

in convincing even those unfamiliar with our system of logic and method of enquiry that Vedanta was quite simple, clear and easy. Besides, he used the world language, English, instead of the elitist Sanskrit in order to make available the treasure-house of Vedantic knowledge to the vast majority of the Sanskrit illiterates in India and indeed to the whole world. Swamiji even declared that that was his life's work:

“... to put the Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry philosophy and intricate mythology and queer startling psychology a religion which shall be easy, simple, popular and at the same time meet the requirement of the highest minds – is a task only those can understand who have attempted it. The dry Advaita must become living – poetic – in everyday life; out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms... And all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp it. That is my life's work.” (1)

Perhaps, it was this virtue of simple and clear articulation of Vedantic ideas in Swamiji that prompted the school of orthodoxy scholars to deny him his

rightful place as a great thinker and philosopher.

Only those who are unwilling to struggle for self-realisation will entertain unnecessary doubts and idle curiosity. And Swamiji had all along discouraged such futile and flippant attitudes. For example, Swamiji unceremoniously brushed aside the pandit and his question about the cause of creation with this brusque answer. “The law of causation applies only to the World after creation, not to creation itself. Your question is irrational. Ask a rational question and I shall answer it.” The same question in another form was put by a devotee on another occasion and Swamiji's answer was, “Ignorance, ignorance, ignorance. An honest Hindu will say, ‘I do not know.’ Try to reach God and you will be free from the sorrows of the World.”

One is reminded of the words of Sri Krishna in The Gita :

*Ajnanen'avrtam jnanam
tena muhyani jantavah
Anityam asukham lokam
imam prapya bhajasva Mam (2)*

(Knowledge is enveloped by ignorance and therefore the beings suffer from delusion; since you have come to live in this transient world of sorrow, worship me with devotion) In short, the end and aim of philosophy is God (Self) realization.

The prime concern of the Upanishads is the glory of the Self and how to realise it. No doubt, they contain colourful descriptions of creation: the universe comes out of Brahman like sparks from the blazing fire, like hair and nails growing from a living person etc. But they are only of secondary importance and Swamiji accepts them as such. Similarly acceptable are the views of the dualists and qualified monists with regard to the nature of the individual soul (jeeva) and jagat (the universe). They are not contradictory but complimentary to each other as they are the experiences of the seekers of Truth at the different levels and stages of realization. However, they are partial and incomplete compared to the experience of Advaita, of monism which includes and far exceeds those of the others, even as the footprint of the elephant more than includes those of the other animals of the for-

est. Advaita alone attempts to give a convincing and satisfying explanation of the nature of three entities of jeeva and jagat and Iswara (the individual soul, the Universe and God).

No doubt Swamiji belongs to the Advaita School of philosophy – but with a difference. Now, it becomes evident on a closer scrutiny that the doctrine of illusionism (*mithya-vada*) of the Advaitin contradicts his own other theory of (*anirvacaneeya khyati*) indeterminism. They cannot be easily reconciled because an entity cannot be described at once as true and false or existent and non-existent. Such a standpoint will be untenable in logic or philosophy. But then, the Advaitin has no better explanation to offer. This then is the predicament. To the Advaitin, Brahman or God alone is true and all else is false, untrue and non-existent. The individual soul and the universe are pure illusions projected by Maya or nescience like the serpent-in-the-rope, the mirage, dream or imagination. They can have no reality in any of the three tenses of time. This stance of the Advaitin, however, is open to objection. If they are mere illusions, how come, that they

are felt and experienced by one and all without exception? If they are illusory and non-existent, who is to be liberated from what bondage? In that case, sacred texts, the preceptor and religious exercises will find no place in the scheme of life. To this, the Advaitin's answer is that both Maya and its effects are indeterminable – neither real nor unreal. They are real at the empirical level but are unreal at the absolute and ultimate level. However, the Advaitin does not satisfy anyone with this sort of plausible ambiguity which fails to solve the philosophical problem in hand. His opponents point out with derisive delight that the Advaitin has only spoiled the case by substituting the Upanishadic Brahma-Vada with his own questionable maya-vada! The war goes on!!

Now Swamiji finds a way out of this philosophical check-mate by introducing what can be called atma-vada, the concept of Practical Vedanta. Its central idea is contained in Swamiji's celebrated declaration, "Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal.." (3)

It tells us that each one of us is essentially divine. However, it is also true that now, I find myself in the unenviable position of the little finite soul dogged by all its limitations and imperfections. It is a firm unshakable fact borne out by my own experience which no Vedantic doctrine can question or deny. It is immaterial for me to know as to how I, the infinite and immutable Self, has become the finite soul caught in a state of perpetual flux. Whatever may be the cause of this downfall, Maya, ignorance or forgetfulness, theories and doctrines and endless debates on that issue cannot alter the fact that I am now the imperfect, finite soul subject to all kinds of mutations. The only thing of importance and urgency here is how to regain my true divine nature. All else is trash, useless talk, says Swamiji. Wisdom lies in awakening the divinity inherent in each one of us when the phenomena of the world and the soul (*jagat* and *jeeva*) will be swept away, swallowed by our pure, perfect and infinite Self. This, in a nutshell, is Swamiji's atmavada or Practical Vedanta. Here, Swamiji does not enunciate any new doctrine radically different from the soul Self-identity-cum-difference (*bheda-abheda*). However,

by the shift in emphasis from dry doctrinism to practicality, Swamiji sets Vedanta free from finite intellectual exercises and shows us the path to Self-realisation through self-effort. By this, Swamiji is not evading the philosophical issue or side-tracking it with pragmatism. For, one cannot come to a final conclusion on issues like the identity-cum-difference of the soul, Self, or the cause of creation, even when debates and discussions on them were to be carried on till the cows come home. This is so because finality is not intellectual but experiential. So, in order to reach the final solution Swamiji directs our attention, our Sradha, from interminable dialectical and semantic squabbles to self-realisation by means of spiritual disciplines which is at once the fulfillment of philosophy and the final goal of human life.

Varna or caste system is purely a social institution which has nothing to do with religion and spirituality. And yet tradition has it that only the Brahmins have the authority to learn and teach the Vedas. Similarly, spiritual instructions can be imparted only to those who have acquired the minimum pre-requisites called *Sadhana-cha-*

tushtayam, the four-fold qualifications. Swamiji repudiates these privileges and prerogatives in toto as they have no scriptural sanction whatsoever. Their only support comes from the selfishness, intolerance and tyranny of priest craft. Such Upanishadic invitations as "Listen, O children of Immortal Bliss inhabiting this world," "The Self is to be seen to be heard, reflected and meditated upon"; "That Self, that is to be known, realized" are meant clearly for all those who suffer from the grief and pain of worldliness and not for the favoured few, the elitists well-versed in Sanskrit and the scriptures. Swamiji has little or no patience with such 'touch-me-not-ists' and 'frogs in the well' passing muster for true Vedantins.

What Swamiji did was to broadcast the grand Upanishadic truths all over the world by using English, the world language, and thus inviting even the *mlechhas* (cultural drop-outs) and their true identity. It was Swamiji who made the spiritual wealth of India, so far shut up in books, Brahmin brains, forest retreats, and assembly of scholars, the priceless heritage common to the whole world. In keeping with the spirit of

the university of the Upanishadic benediction,
“May all be happy”,
“May all the worlds be happy,”

Swamiji freed Vedanta from the stranglehold of the orthodox priest craft and boldly declared in loud ringing tones ---

“Let us proclaim to every soul, Arise awake and stop not till the goal is reached. Arise, awake! Awake from this hypnotism of weakness. None is really weak; the soul is infinite, omnipotent and omniscient. Stand up, assert yourself, proclaim the God within you, do not deny Him!

...Teach yourselves, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakens. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.” (4)

Similarly, Swamiji has rejected the theory of the incompatibility of action and knowledge by re-defining the terms, *pravritti* and *nivritti* (ac-

tion and actionlessness). If one can look upon action as work done as worship to God, action and knowledge will become complimentary to each other. Similarly if *pravritti* can be understood to mean selfish action to fatten the body and appease the senses, and *nivritti* to signify withdrawal from such selfish actions in order to do spiritual exercises for self-realisation, total abstention from work as a condition to liberation will have no place in our life. If all life's work were to be done in the spirit of worship to God, the idea of actionlessness equated with knowledge will have to be given up. Nor is work to be shunned even if it is possible and practical. Sister Nivedita, in her introduction to The complete works of Swami Vivekananda, pinpoints the distinct advantage Vedanta philosophy has gained by Swamiji's infusion of practicality into it:

“If the many and the One be indeed the same Reality, then it is not all the modes of worship alone, but equally all modes of struggle, all modes of creation which are paths of realization. No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To con-

quer is to renounce. Life is itself religion...”(5)

Swamiji seeks to drive home the truth that when philosophy gets weighed down by over-intellectualism, the result will be controversies and contradictions. When importance is attached to the practical application of Vedantic concepts for the realization of the goal of life, contradictions will yield place to a vision of harmony. The apparent *karma* and *Jnana*, God with and without form, fetishism and absolutism etc, will be resolved and overcome by the vision that they are complimentary to one another as representing the progressively ascending realms of spiritual experience. Swamiji's standpoint is that the prime function of philosophy is to aid the seekers in realizing their essential and inherent divine nature. It is certain that serious students of Vedanta will look upon Swamiji not only as the interpreter of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings but also as the exponent of the philosophy of Neo-Vedanta lived by Him

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The Invisible Hand

That Guided Swami Vivekananda to the Chicago Parliament of Religions

The triumph of Swami Vivekananda at the Chicago Parliament of Religions could well be looked upon as a kind of watershed in inter-religious understanding in the modern world. For one thing, it certainly represented the fulfillment of the Indian Renaissance initiated by religious reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayanand and Justice Ranade. For another, it was the Swami's astonishing success at the Parliament that paved the way for the Ramakrishna movement to come into being. The Ramakrishna Math and Mission, in its turn, were to be the first religious institution to carry on its activities on the lines of a modern organization. It also marked the beginning of Hindu monks and missionaries sent across land and sea as preachers, the Buddhist practice revived after a lapse of nearly twenty five centuries! Above all the inclusion of



Sri Ramakrishna in ecstasy during a *Kirtan* session

Daridra-Narayana-puja or service to the sick and the suffering, the poor and the needy as worship of the God-in-man to be an integral part of monasticism (*sannyasa-dharma*) was a notable, revolutionary innovation in the history of Hinduism. It was practical Vedanta at its noblest best.

Thus, the Swamiji's participation in the Parliament of Religions as the delegate representing Hinduism was of far-reaching consequence. Yet, it would appear as if he had attended it as an 'uninvited guest'! He had neither received any formal invitation from any organization from Chicago, nor had he reached there armed with any credentials from any Hindu organization in India. In fact, he did not even know when the Parliament was to begin! It would seem that the Swamiji ventured to go to America on the strength of some hearsay or rumour – so meager was his preparation for taking such a momentous step in his life. And yet, he not only represented Hinduism but also came out of the Parliament as its hero-figure! which was nothing short of a miracle.

It was during his wanderings in Kathiawar to-

wards the close of 1891 that the Swamiji came to know of the Parliament of Religions for the first time. Instinctively, he felt an urge to participate in it and soon the thought became stronger in him. "If someone can help me with the passage money, all will be well, and I shall go," he told his friend and host, Haridas, in January 1892. He spoke about it to the rulers of Khetri and Mysore, to the Raja of Ramnad as also to his disciples of Madras like Alasinga Perumal. However, he had not made up his mind because he was not sure whether it was only his desire or God's wish. He was waiting for the signal from God.

And it did come one day not long afterwards when "the Swamiji had a symbolic dream in which Sri Ramakrishna walked out into the sea and beckoned him to follow." (2) This greatly pleased him and when he received also the blessings of the Holy Mother, the matter was finally settled. Dancing with joy like a child, he told his Madras disciples, "yes now to the West, to the West! Now I am ready.... The Mother herself has spoken." (3). In fact, he was so sure of his success in America as to tell

Swami Turiyananda of it, "Haribhai, I am going to America. Whatever you hear of as happening there (at the Parliament of Religions) is all for this. For this (me) alone everything is being arranged." (4). He received some financial help from the Raja of Ramnad, the Maharaja of Khetri, his disciple who provided the Swamiji "with a First class ticket, a handsome purse and ample clothings." (5). As well as the new name, 'Vivekananda'. Thus equipped, the Swamiji set sail from Bombay on the 31st of May 1893.

He reached Chicago on the 30th of July, but was taken aback when he learnt that the Parliament was to begin only in September and that only those with proper credentials would be admitted as delegates to it. A coloured man in strange clothes from far-off India, the Swamiji was like a lost child, a perfect stranger puzzled by the dazzling material prosperity of the New World. He was without a friend and fast becoming penniless. Soon, he was on a train to the less expensive city of Boston and it so happened that a fellow-passenger, Miss Katherine Osborne, a rich society lady of Boston invited the Swamiji to be

her guest throughout his stay in the city. It was a godsend and the Swamiji gladly accepted it.

Through Miss Osborne, the Swamiji became acquainted with Prof John Wright of Harvard to whom he spoke of his problem of credentials. To this, the Professor's reply was, 'To ask you, Swamiji, for your credentials is like asking the sun to state his right to shine.' (6). He then gave his letter of introduction addressed to the Chairman of the Parliament in which he chose to describe the Swamiji thus, "Here is a man who is more learned than all our learned professors put together." (7). Returning to Chicago, the Swamiji found to his horror that he had lost the letter as well as the address of the office of the Parliament. Friendless and dejected, he had to spend that cold night in a big box in the railway freight yard. When he begged for food the next morning, he was rudely driven away from every door. Tired and hungry, he sat down under a tree by the roadside resigning himself to God's grace which came to him in the form of a lady of regal bearing offering help. She was Mrs George W Hale, 'my American mother,' who took him to her house

for bath and breakfast and then took him to the office of the Parliament. She returned home after the Swamiji was safely accommodated with the other oriental delegates to the Parliament.

The Parliament of Religions which was held from the 11th to the 27th of September 1893 opened in the Columbus Hall which seated more than six thousand educated, enlightened men and women. The Swamiji had never before faced such a huge audience; in fact, he had no experience of public speaking at all. Nor had he prepared short lecture notes as the other speakers had done. All that he had was stage fright in an ample measure! But hardly had he finished speaking the endearing address of five words – “Sisters and Brothers of America” – when the entire audience of “seven thousand people rose to their feet as a tribute to something, they knew not what.” (8). The power and charm of the ‘panchakshari mantra’ that the Swamiji then chanted laid such an irresistible, indefinable enchantment on the soul of the audience that the listeners were moved to give a standing ovation to the Swamiji for full two minutes!

With his opening speech lasting less than five minutes, the nameless monk from India became the world-famous Swami Vivekananda. The morning newspapers hailed him as “an orator by divine right” while Sister Nivedita assessed it thus, “.. when he began to speak, it was of ‘the religious ideas of the Hindus,’ but when he ended, Hinduism had been created.” (9). What he did, in fact, “was to proclaim the charter of Neo-Hinduism”... (10). Was it not a miracle that the Swamiji with his maiden speech lasting less than five minutes should become the hero-figure in the Parliament of Religions? Was it not an incredible achievement that the Hindu delegate with no credential from any Hindu organization should become the honoured world-teacher of Vedanta over-night? Apparently, it was so, most undoubtedly; but if we cared to go a bit deeper into the matter, it would be found that this was the only natural outcome of all the trials that the Swamiji had to face from time to time ever since he reached Chicago.

Nothing would prevent us from coming to the conclusion that it was the invisible hand of Sri

Ramakrishna that guided the Swamiji through all the vicissitudes from near-defeat to glorious success. It was the same hand that beckoned the Swamiji to follow and took him safely to America. In fact, the work entrusted to him was to spread the message of his Master which was the same as 'doing the work of the Mother', as He put it. And it was to carry out this life's mission that Sri Ramakrishna led his wonderful and worthy instrument up the steps to the podium of the Parliament of Religions. And the message that rang out from the six lectures that he delivered there was the conclusions reached by the Parliament of Religions held under the banyan tree at Dakshineshwar by Sri Ramakrishna in his own life some three decades earlier, namely, universality and harmony of religions. Swamiji's success in Chicago was just their natural extension - the world's recognition and acceptance of those conclusions. Therefore, it was both factual and reasonable to conclude that the unseen hand of Sri Ramakrishna was Swamiji's strength and support at every step and in all his difficulties.

Even a surface analysis of the Swamiji's six lec-

tures given at the Parliament of Religions would show that he was interpreting his Master's teachings to the West effectively and in an idiom intelligible to them. In the very first address delivered on the 11th of September, the Swamiji struck the keynote of all his lectures to follow, namely the spirit of universality, religious harmony and tolerance breathed by the world's most ancient religion, Hinduism, the mother of all religions which he had the honour to represent. The Hindus believed, he declared, that the followers of the difficult faiths, choosing different paths according to their tastes and tendencies, would finally reach the One God called by many names, even as the many rivers flowing straight or crooked would fall into the sea. Here, the Swamiji was only paraphrasing Sri Ramakrishna's pithy statement, "as many faiths, so many paths."

The second lecture that the Swamiji gave on the 15th of September dealt with the 'frog in the well' attitude of the religious leaders which was the cause of all the bigotry, intolerance and fanaticism in the world. The narrowness of 'my religion and my God alone, and no other' was at

the root of all troubles. This would end, the Swamiji pointed out, only with God-realisation when all quarrels and controversies in the name of God would be found hollow and futile. This was just an elucidation of the Master's parable of the strange creature on the tree – the chameleon. On the 19th the Swamiji read a paper on Hinduism on the Vedic religion. The Vedas, he explained, were “the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws, the eternal laws” that govern the spiritual world, the moral, ethical and spiritual relations between soul and soul and between individual spirits and the Father of all spirits,” much like the laws of nature, beginningless and endless.

The religion of the Vedas taught us that the highest goal of human life was to realize the divinity inherent in us. The Swamiji declared, “.... The Hindu refuses to call you sinners. We are the children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. Ye divinities on earth – sinners! It is a sin to call a man so; it is a standing libel on human nature. Come up, O lions, and shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls immortal, spirits free, blest and eternal

....” (12). Its realisation could be attained only by long and intense seeking through spiritual disciplines and not by scholarly disputations or religious conversions. The truth of any religion was to be tested on the touchstone of experience, of the direct perception of God. And the means to reach and realize God, the Swamiji pointed out, were many and varied, determined by the stage at which the spiritual aspirant stood. “To the Hindu, man is not travelling from error to truth,” he declared, “but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth.” To him all the religions from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism, means so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and reach unity, and to remain free from the shackles of creedal dogmas, therefore, formed an essential, integral part of Vedanta.

It was here in the context of tolerance and acceptance of all paths leading Godward as true that the Swamiji presented before the world audience his idea of a Universal religion: “....if there is ever to be a universal religion, it must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite like the God it will preach, and whose

sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike.....It will be a religion which will have no place for persecution and intolerance in its polity....and whose whole scope, whose whole force, will be centred in aiding humanity to realize its own true, divine nature" (14). This, one can see, was the religion lived and taught by Sri Ramakrishna, the religion marked by the spirit of universality and harmony.

The fourth address delivered on the 20th September was more humanistic than religious in its tone. In it, the Swamiji made it clear that what India stood in need of was food for her starving bodies and not Christian preaching for her well-fed souls. To preach religion to the poor, starving people, he said, was an insult, a cruel joke. He concluded his short speech instinct with indignation with the criticism that it was very difficult "to get (monetary) help for heathens from Christians in a Christian land." (15) (If one may hazard a guess, this lecture must have been given in answer to a provocative speech made earlier by a Christian delegate in justification of the useful missionary work in India by

the American preachers, for this one is distinctly different in tone from his other addresses).

The fifth lecture that the Swamiji gave on the 26th dealt with Buddhism as the fulfillment of Hinduism. Here, he made some significant points comparing the Indian and Semetic religions on the one hand and Brahminism and Buddhism on the other. He held the view that India's slavery for a thousand years was due to the divorce between the head of Sankara and the heart of Buddha. With the tremendous absolving capacity and wonderful resilience of Hinduism, the two were held in a happy harmony to form an ideal religion.

The sixth and final lecture of Swamiji was on the 27th September 1893 at the concluding session of the Parliament of Religions. He made use of it to thank the organizers, the speakers and the audience, for making the wonderful religious dream, come true. It was possible for the Parliament to show that the followers of the different religions would grow to fullness and fruition in God-realization through their own innate strength much like a seed growing into a plant.

The duty of every religionist was to strive for this goal and not to quarrel, fight and destroy the others, for virtuous men, of holiness and purity were to be found in all religions. The Swamiji concluded his speech with the hope and prayer that the Parliament of religions would succeed in keeping the banner of harmony and peace aloft to usher in a happy, new world order.

It will be easy even for a casual reader of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature to recognize that the Swamiji's Chicago addresses were eloquent recreations in English of the Universal Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna.

=-Jai Ramakrishna=-

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About the Author.....

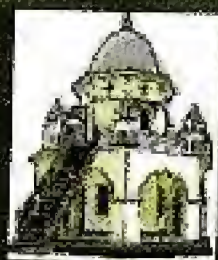
Dr. Achuthan is one of the very few surviving initiated disciples of Swami Nirmalananda (1863-1938). He was blessed with spiritual initiation in 1936 at the tender age of nine.

He is a devotee and a student of Vedanta in the Ramakrishna tradition. He studied the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature, the Upanishads and the Gita under the guidance of Swami Amalanandaji. He learnt Bhagavatham under the distinguished Sanskrit and Vedantic scholar Vaisravanath Raman Nambudiri. He had his early lessons in Sanskrit and scriptures from his father A.K.T.K.M. Vasudevan Nambudiripad.

Dr Achuthan is a post graduate in English language and literature from the Madras University. Kerala University awarded him the Ph.D. for his dissertation, "Vedantic Lore in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot", in 1970. Dr. Achuthan was a devoted Professor of English for three decades. He had served as chairman of several boards under the University of Calicut.

He authored fifteen books on religion and Vedanta philosophy. Besides, he is a regular contributor to several journals and periodicals.

He was the first recipient of the "Swami Nirmalananda Award", which was conferred on him in 2011 for his life time achievements for teaching Vedanta in the light of Ramakrishna Vivekananda teachings.

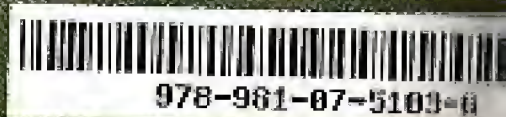


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